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OUR COLUMNISTS ON THE A-BOMB*

By JANET BESSE and HAROLD D. LASSWELL

OPINION differs about the role of syndicated columnists in the forming of national opinion and in the decision-making process in the United States. Our columnists have been the subject of pioneering studies, but we have a long way to go before the picture can be called historically complete, scientifically precise, or fully satisfactory for policy-making purposes.¹ What the columnists say is an important chapter in the history of the American public, and history is most useful for critical purposes when written close to the event.² The general theory of communication and politics can be refined as the details of the opinion process are more fully known.

This brief report describes how most of the major columnists of the nation handled the A-bomb. After the dropping of the first bombs revealed the existence of a new weapon of unprecedented destructiveness, the new facts were gradually assimilated. A new set of expectations suddenly began to affect other expectations, demands, and identifications. In the assimilative process, the columnists (some of whom doubled as radio commentators) could not fail to figure. Did they play the destructiveness of the bomb up or down? What immediate and long-range policies did they propose? Were they ahead of the American people or behind them? How did they compare with other opinion leaders? What effect did they have? How were they influenced? Were they more or less realistic than other leaders?

The data reported here contribute to the mosaic that must be constructed before these questions can be finally disposed of.

* A paper from "Studies in Expectation in World Politics," a research program being conducted under the auspices of the Yale Institute of International Studies.

¹ A valuable recent publication is David Elliott Weingast, *Walter Lippmann: A Study in Personal Journalism*, New Brunswick, Rutgers Univ. Press, 1949.

² The Commission on Freedom of the Press, in a widely endorsed recommendation, suggested that the function of reporting upon the performance of mass media should be undertaken by a continuing agency equipped with a competent staff. All branches of the communication process, not excluding the columnists and their audiences, can profit from the warning and spur of criticism.

Fourteen well-known columnists are reported upon. They were chosen chiefly because they were widely syndicated and covered the spectrum of political opinion. All statements having to do with the bomb were read and recorded for at least three years after the explosions in Japan. The aim was to follow the interpretation of atomic weapons through the early stages of novelty and adjustment.

THE COMPOSITE PICTURE

A composite of the columnists: Although everyone recognized the destructiveness of the new weapon, there was little mood of hysteria or panic. While it was generally conceded that the "secret" could not be kept for many years, it was usually recommended that the United States should offer the secret in exchange for a system of genuine international inspection and control of atomic energy. As a rule, the columnists recognized that effective control implied a renunciation of power tantamount to the setting up of world government. Since anything so drastic was unlikely, and since the Soviet Union was aloof and hostile, the prevailing view was that the nation must stay ahead in the armament race, though keeping the door open for agreement. As Soviet-American relations degenerated, the discussion of the control of atomic energy dwindled in volume, novelty, and hopefulness.

Some significant points emerge from this composite picture. The columnists did not take extremely aggressive positions, such as advocating preventive war against the Soviet Union. As a whole, they favored the policies adopted by the American government for international bargaining (the Baruch Plan) and for the domestic control of atomic energy. On the question of military or civilian control inside the United States, most of the writers stood for civilian supremacy. The columnists were neither eccentric, irresponsible, nor original in what they had to say. For the most part, they were as serious, confused, and groping as any other group of citizens. In a word, they shared the common predispositions of the American people. It is not clear that the columnists were much ahead or behind general opinion.

TABLE I

Writer	Dates	<i>A</i> Total Columns	<i>B</i> Columns Mak- ing Reference	<i>B</i> as Percent of <i>A</i>
Eliot	Aug. 8, '45– May 16, '47	299	90	30.1%
Grafton	Sept. 4, '45– Sept. 18, '46	228	43	18.9%
Thompson	Aug. 8, '45– Dec. 31, '48	482	86	17.8%
Lippmann	Sept. 11, '45– Dec. 31, '48	403	56	13.9%
Pearson	Aug. 8, '45– Dec. 31, '48	1169	130	11.1%
Childs	Aug. 7, '45– Dec. 31, '48	933	92	9.9%
Shirer	Aug. 12, '45– June 13, '48	135	13	9.6%
Alsops	Dec. 31, '45– Dec. 31, '48	626	58	9.3%
Sokolsky	Aug. 8, '45– Dec. 31, '48	1042	73	7.0%
Winchell	Sept. 4, '45– Dec. 31, '48	742	51	6.9%
Welles	Aug. 8, '45– Dec. 31, '48	178	10	5.6%
Lawrence	Aug. 8, '45– Dec. 31, '48	890	47	5.3%
Sullivan	Sept. 8, '45– Dec. 31, '48	612	9	1.5%
Pegler	Aug. 7, '45– Dec. 31, '48	699	6	0.9%

TABLE II

Writer	1945				1946			
	Jan.-April		May-August		Sept.-December			
	A Total Columns	B Ref. Columns	A Total Columns	B Ref. Columns	A Total Columns	B Ref. Columns	A Total Columns	B Ref. Columns
Eliot	85	34	64	17	40	18	35	11
Grafton	77	22	79	9	63	10	9	2
Thompson	60	28	49	10	51	11	45	8
Lippmann	42	8	44	14	34	6	51	7
Pearson	131	24	120	19	117	13	114	19
Childs	126	24	102	18	96	11	91	6
Shirer	19	5	12	0	16	2	17	2
Alsops	1	0	67	13	69	8	69	13
Sokolsky	122	17	102	9	103	9	100	4
Winchell	83	16	84	3	56	8	83	3
Welles	21	3	17	2	18	1	17	1
Lawrence	122	19	86	6	86	8	84	5
Sullivan	84	6	60	2	70	0	70	0
Pegler	90	0	55	0	79	2	68	1
B as Percent of A	19.4%		13.0%		11.9%		9.6%	

TABLE II—Continued

Writer	1947				1948							
	Jan.-April		May-Aug.		Sept.-Dec.		Jan.-April		May-Aug.		Sept.-Dec.	
	A Total Columns	B Ref. A Total Columns	A Total Columns	B Ref. A Total Columns	A Total Columns	B Ref. A Total Columns	A Total Columns	B Ref. A Total Columns	A Total Columns	B Ref. A Total Columns	A Total Columns	B Ref. A Total Columns
Eliot	35	9	4	1								
Grafton												
Thompson	48	4	34	4	48	6	45	3	50	2	52	10
Lippmann	46	8	26	1	39	1	52	8	46	2	23	1
Pearson	120	10	105	8	118	6	120	14	110	8	114	9
Childs	102	10	98	2	71	1	84	9	78	4	85	7
Shirer	17	2	15	0	16	2	16	0	7	0	0	0
Alsops	68	5	70	4	70	0	68	4	74	4	70	7
Sokolsky	102	16	103	2	102	4	103	6	103	1	102	5
Winchell	83	5	49	4	82	4	85	2	52	2	85	4
Welles	18	0	17	1	18	0	17	0	18	2	17	0
Lawrence	85	6	85	1	85	0	86	0	85	0	86	2
Sullivan	68	0	70	0	69	0	52	0	16	0	53	1
Pegler	56	0	68	0	77	0	54	2	75	0	77	1
B as Percent of A	8.8%		3.8%		3.0%		6.1%		3.5%		6.2%	

ATTENTION TO ATOMIC PROBLEMS

The composite picture de-emphasizes the differences which distinguish individual and subgroups of columnists from one another. To begin with the simplest contrast: The amount of attention given to the bomb and the problems arising from it varied considerably. (See Table I.) However, a glance at Table II shows that the broad curve of attention to the bomb was similar, dropping off after the initial novelty wore off.

Some individual differences strike no one with surprise, since they accord with some obvious predispositions. George Fielding Eliot, for example, specializes on military questions, and the bomb came squarely in his domain. Nor is it unexpected to find Dorothy Thompson heavily engaged with the topic, since her specialty is foreign affairs. At the other extreme lies Westbrook Pegler, devoted to selected issues of domestic concern.

There are, however, some puzzles. Take the case of Sumner Welles, who ranks low in preoccupation with the problem. Here is a man obviously well qualified and willing to deal with foreign policy questions. Did he abstain from stressing the bomb for fear of compromising the success of whatever hopes there were from negotiation with Russia; or was he utterly hopeless about the outcome? Consider Mark Sullivan. For years Sullivan has specialized on domestic questions. But he ranks much lower than colleagues with the same dominant interest. Must we say that age counts, and that Sullivan, who is much the eldest columnist, is reluctant to think about new and difficult questions? Or is this the wisdom of experience, which whispers that it is not worth talking about problems which cannot be constructively dealt with?

DESTRUCTIVENESS

Few would deny that Walter Winchell takes a high, if not the highest rank, among columnists in the emotional intensity of the demand that he makes upon the audience. Winchell exploited the sensational possibilities of atomic weapons, often quoting rumors which he promptly refuted. For example, he reported that the original United States plan had been to

drop five hundred A-bombs on Japan; and that the Russians had atomic weapons or even better than atomic weapons. Winchell coupled alarm with reassurance, declaring that a defense would be found against the bomb, even as in the past there had been defenses against every new weapon. George E. Sokolsky, who is also given to emphatic statements, fully stressed the horror of the bomb when it was announced in August of 1945, saying that both sides would probably be wiped out in a future war.

The record shows that Drew Pearson was especially active in keeping alive the theme of A-bomb destructiveness, frequently quoting experts to jar his readers out of a complacent attitude or away from a tendency to divert attention from unpleasant matters.

Mark Sullivan's views were the most moderate expressed by those who candidly stated the power of atomic weapons. He did not deny the effectiveness of the bomb, but he joined in the theme that a defense would be found against the bomb, as for all previous weapons.

MORALITY

Only fleeting mention was made by the columnists of the opinion that the bombing of Japanese cities had been an immoral act, or that it might be so regarded by others. Because the bomb did not end the war, David Lawrence questioned the justification of using it at all, emphasizing the grimness of the precedent set. Sokolsky remarked in passing that a future enemy would remember our ruthless bombing of Japan. In view of her previous record as a moralizer, it is not unexpected to find that Dorothy Thompson was the most outspoken in condemning the use of the bomb against Japanese cities. She said that we should have shown its terrific power some place where thousands of civilian casualties would not have occurred.³

³ As Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., and Sylvia Eberhart have pointed out, there is no solid evidence to support the opinion that many Americans had or have a sense of guilt for having dropped the bomb on Japan. (See *American Opinion on World Affairs in the Atomic Age*, Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press, 1948.)

THE SECRET

One point on which the columnists were practically unanimous was that our monopoly of the secret would at most be a matter of a few years. On this matter, at least, the columnists diverged from the lay public, over half of whom are reported to have thought that other countries already knew how to make bombs.⁴

Comments upon the secret, however, were incidental to the discussion of what our policy ought to be during whatever period we had the secret. In the light of subsequent events it is perhaps of special interest to note that under the impact of the Hiroshima revelations, there was some readiness to share the secret without insisting upon elaborate arrangements for international control of atomic energy, or of the new weapon. It may be that some of the earliest statements by Pearson, Lippmann, and Marquis Childs "took it for granted" that any act of disclosure on our part would be in return for international inspection. But some of the articles written in the shadow of the first atomic clouds of the autumn of 1945 were not so explicit or insistent upon a detailed *quid pro quo*. Pearson spoke of giving up the secret in order to relieve world tension and to dispell the suspense caused by Russia's feverish attempts to develop a bomb. Lippmann also wrote in support of giving up the secret in order to prevent any nation from developing a bomb without our knowledge. He doubted that we could keep the secret anyway, and argued that an armament race would be infinitely worse than disclosure. At first Childs believed that keeping the secret was actually a menace to our national security, since it nourished an illusion of safety while the Russians developed a counter-bomb. (It was in March 1946 that Childs disclaimed that any responsible person had been in favor of giving up the secret without an arrangement for adequate control.)

As early as November 1945, Winchell questions whether there is a secret, using various quotations. Some of the statements made as late as June 1946 implied that the secret might as well be given up because we would always be ahead by at

⁴ Cottrell and Eberhart, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

least three months, anyhow. David Lawrence thought that we should pledge never to use the bomb again, holding that it was unnecessary to give up the secret if we outlawed the bomb until world peace was definitely assured. Eliot felt that morally we should share the secret, but that as a matter of expedient policy we should go no further than to reveal the size of our stockpile of bombs and to disclose enough information to further peacetime use of atomic energy (April 1947).

The views expressed by Sokolsky accurately summed up the expert opinions available to the columnists.⁵ Sokolsky said that the essential scientific information was available to all, but that the manufacturing process was extremely complex and expensive. Obviously, most other countries were in no position to overtake this country in the immediate future. In the long run the manufacturing process could not be kept secret, but he did not see any advantage in giving the knowledge away for nothing. In common with most of his colleagues, Sokolsky supported the Baruch Plan.

WORLD GOVERNMENT

The immediate impact of the bomb on alert and imaginative minds is nowhere better illustrated than in the declarations favoring world government which were made in the autumn of 1945. In August, Dorothy Thompson flatly asserted that we must have a world state. In October, she modified this to suggest a federative military alliance with an authority having all scientific knowledge and inspection rights, and with each state sacrificing some sovereignty. In November, she called for a free plebiscite of all adults in the world to decide on a global authority. William L. Shirer emphasized the changes brought about in the world by the atomic bomb. War was revolutionized and world thinking must undergo a radical change. International law, in which the world still puts its faith, would have to be replaced by a world authority capable of enforcing inspection of national laboratories and industries. (Shirer did

⁵ The nuclear scientists who became active in 1945, and whose principal organ was the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, undoubtedly had more to do with establishing certain assumptions of fact in the minds of opinion leaders than any other authoritative group. We give attention to their role in a later report.

not use the term "world government" for his "world authority.") In August 1945, Sokolsky thought the national state might prove to be impossible as a result of the A-bomb.

Broad declarations of this kind began to melt as discussion shifted to the ways and means of action in the immediate future, and the activities of the United Nations led to nothing. Promptly recognizing that world government was impossible under prevailing conditions, Dorothy Thompson declared in November of 1945 that the only hope was to strengthen the United Nations and for each government to write into its own constitution a clause prohibiting war. Obviously hoping to circumvent objections based upon claims of sovereignty, she reiterated through 1946 and 1947 that sovereignty would not be infringed by an inspection arrangement unless there were a violation of the agreement. Thompson kept straining for new and promising policy ideas, proposing in June of 1948 a Confederation of Europe to act as a neutral power between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A.

Lippmann became preoccupied with the idea that world law should be binding on individuals as well as governments. His position appeared to be that an apparatus of world government is superfluous, even though agreements among nations are not enough. He entertained the view that public opinion can enforce world law. Although at first Lippmann held that inspection was essential to prevent violations of any agreement for the control of atomic weapons, by November of 1946 he declared that no nation would accept it. This columnist endorsed the Baruch Plan, though he considered the veto irrelevant. He also found something to commend in the Gromyko plan, saying that although our bombs would be destroyed, we would still have the secret. At the same time Lippmann declared that the U.S.S.R. would not agree to any control plan until she herself had an A-bomb. In spite of the talk of a preventive war, the U.S.S.R., wrote Lippmann, was confident that the U.S.A. would never attack, and gained courage from the weakness of United States foreign policy. Hence the United States was in truth put in a defensive posture, enabling the Soviet leaders to take the propaganda offensive. Lippmann eventually devoted himself to affirming the high importance

of strengthening our allies, leaving the discussion of world law in abeyance.

The sequence of themes in Thompson and Lippmann was characteristic of the columnists who at first talked in terms of a united world solution. Shirer held to the position that the outlawing of the bomb was essential, but since he recognized the hopelessness of this policy, later columns were devoted to the importance of strengthening the total power of the United States to deal with the Russian menace. Sokolsky moved from his early speculations upon the superannuation of nationalism and held that current hostilities, by accentuating nationalism, made world government impossible. Immediately after Hiroshima, George Fielding Eliot wrote in favor of the idea of world government, but by the end of October 1945, the impracticability of genuine world government was expressly stated. He said that forcing the issue of world government would serve no visible purpose, since the United Nations was adequate for all that could be accomplished now. "Half a world government," such as a Federal Union of Democracies, would be worthless in his opinion, although he supported the idea of a closer working unity among English-speaking peoples.

RUSSIAN OBDURACY

Unquestionably the most striking shift among the columnists was toward pessimism about the possibility of arriving at a peaceful solution of differences with the U.S.S.R. As the hope of a negotiated solution faded, the columnists became largely absorbed in evaluating policy in terms of the relative power position of the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. The responsibility for the continuing crisis was, with minor reservations, attributed to Soviet leadership.

Dorothy Thompson and Walter Lippmann, for example, were gradually reduced to a variety of expedients for strengthening the foreign policy and the fighting potential of this country. Sokolsky eventually wrote that Russia "will either subject all mankind to itself or it will be destroyed" (October 1948). The Alsops discussed numerous proposals for the control of atomic weapons during 1946 and 1947, after which they dealt almost entirely with strategical considerations. Their

conclusion was that since the Russians would never give up any sovereignty to an international inspection body, U.S. preparedness is of overwhelming urgency. The Alsops called attention to the meaning of total security policy, stressing the role of ample secret intelligence, the imperative need of Army-Navy unity, and of accelerated weapon research and bomb production. They dealt with the current indefensibility of Britain and Western Europe, with the vulnerability of U.S. cities to attack, and with the gravity of the fact that we could not within the framework of our traditional institutions launch a surprise attack of the sort so vital to winning a future war. (The Alsops endorsed the Acheson-Lilienthal proposals and the Baruch Plan, save for the veto clause, remarking that Russia could prevent any agency from effective administration of an agreement with or without the veto.)

In 1945 Sumner Welles showed more consideration for the Russian position than any other columnist. He said that our monopoly of the bomb and our omission of the U.S.S.R. from a major conference on atomic energy (the Truman-Attlee-King Conference) gave just cause for Soviet anxiety. But by 1948 Welles was sharply critical of Communist activity in this country and of Russian aggression everywhere. (He was solidly behind the UN throughout the period, and considered pressure on behalf of world government dangerous, since the first requisite of success was a genuinely cooperative atmosphere.)⁶

Russia was consistently presented as the real obstacle in the path of progress toward genuine international control. Mark Sullivan, for instance, dismissed Russian proposals as "vague and general" and impugned their sincerity. Although David Lawrence was not in favor of the Baruch Plan in June of 1946, since he was worried about the U.S.S.R. coming into the possession of atomic information, by 1947 he felt that Baruch was standing firm for U.S. security. By this time it

⁶ Samuel Grafton, whose columns are summarized for the early period, took as his principal theme the need of a friendly and cooperative world atmosphere before any plan can mean anything. He recommended patient direct negotiation with the Soviet Union. Grafton was forthright in saying that the U.S. must have a strong military policy. However, he argued that our government was creating world-wide suspicion by having no definite policy on many basic issues, and by carrying on such affairs as the Bikini tests.

was apparent that the U.S.S.R. would not accede to the American proposals.

Drew Pearson was especially vigorous throughout the whole period in provoking discussion of the significance of the armed forces for U.S. security. In the fall of 1945 he declared that the Navy and huge armies were now obsolete. In the summer of 1946, Pearson declared that the Navy hushed up the disastrous results of the Bikini test in order to protect its huge appropriations. The columnist vigorously condemned bickering within the services, saying that appropriations were kept from genuinely vital spots. By 1947, Pearson was emphasizing the usefulness of propaganda and intelligence in order to pierce the Iron Curtain.

It is reasonable to conclude that while the columnists and the general public, to say nothing of government officials, were marching with the new realities of frustrated hope, the commentators were familiarizing audiences with the new stress on power.

CIVILIAN CONTROL

One of the first issues to arise in connection with atomic energy was whether to make a government monopoly of it, and whether to rely upon military or civilian control. The columnists displayed the uncertain and diverse viewpoints present in the American public. It is, however, likely that in making an articulate and timely defense of the principle of civilian control the columnists were crystallizers of the trend that won.

Marquis Childs concentrated on the issue of civilian control, lending full support to the civilian principle. After the McMahon Bill was finally passed, Childs objected to what he regarded as excessive police measures. He criticized the overstrict FBI investigation to which scientists and civilians associated with any atomic energy project were exposed. Drew Pearson also took a vigorous line on behalf of civilian control, arguing that military control would sacrifice too much for a false conception of security. Pearson thought that businessmen were not suitable controllers, because they would be biased by the future potentials of atomic energy as a source of power.

Therefore the control ought to be put in the hands of scientists, who had demonstrated their ability in the world outside the ivory tower. The Atomic Energy Commission ought to be above party politics and protected from badgering of the kind to which Lilienthal was subjected, or the smear tactics of an election year. George Fielding Eliot flatly stated that since atomic control is a political problem, it ought to be in civilian hands. Samuel Grafton wanted civilian control as a means of making clear to the world that the intentions of the U.S. were free of militarism.

The strongest dissenting voice was George E. Sokolsky, who took the position that the Army should run the AEC. Untried civilians might bungle the job causing a serious threat to U.S. security. Scientists must be free to work, provided they are under the control of the Army. He vigorously attacked the idea that important scientists should be above investigation and attacked both Lilienthal and Condon.

Childs believed that atomic energy represented a scientific-technical development which could not fit into the system of free private enterprise. On the other hand the Alsops felt that atomic energy must eventually rest in the hands of private business when it becomes a major source of power, or else destroy the free enterprise system.

IMPLICATIONS

Reviewing the record of the columnists as a whole, the dominant impression is one of unity, even after allowances are made for dissent. Many predispositions of the American people in relation to foreign policy are exemplified: quick concern for peace; prompt emphasis upon international solutions; reluctant recognition of the armament race; slow appraisal of the situation in terms of power; unwillingness to press for drastic power policies such as preventive war; concern for the principle of civilian supremacy; grudging recognition of the police measures essential in times of perpetual insecurity; righteous indignation at the obduracy of a foreign power in refusing to agree to reasonable proposals; gradual absorption

in national security policies rather than international security measures.⁷

Some columnists were obviously driven by a great sense of responsibility for arriving at workable ideas appropriate to the formidable challenge of the bomb. One subgroup was determined to come up with a solution adapted to international action on a global scale. If the numerous recommendations of a Dorothy Thompson or a Walter Lippmann seem somewhat lacking in clarity, consistency, or reality, it must at once be said that their minds were no more infertile than other leaders of thought.

The march of events continually revealed and crystallized the bipolar structure of world politics. The failure of all minds to find a usable path to peaceful cooperation nourished a growing sense of disappointment. It is known that whatever is unsuccessful is likely to be cast aside. We can therefore foresee that the period we have been describing will not be without significance for the future response of our columnists. New themes and methods are likely to appear. To an increasing degree they will be absorbed with the strategic problems of national security; they will be less patient with long-range speculations, less tolerant of the dissenting voice, and more willing to be "tough" and "realistic." Part of this shift expressed itself in the positions taken up by the columnists after 1946. When the Alsops came back from the war they quickly became preoccupied with national security policy, and in this respect rode the "wave of the future."

It has often been observed that the hard-boiled are typically recruited from disenchanted sentimentalists. It may be that the American mood will swing too far too fast in support of policies that are assumed to be "realistic" because they appear to contradict some of our traditional attitudes. There is no doubt that a continuing crisis of national defense will evoke a general feeling of insecurity throughout the American nation. Uncertainty and anxiety are unwelcome states of mind, capable of arousing irritation and anger as well as depression and lethargy. Hostile impulses which cannot be immediately ex-

⁷ On the U.S. tradition consult Gabriel A. Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1950.

pressed in action against the distant enemy may seek targets nearer home. Hence the atmosphere of mutual suspicion is intensified, and denunciation as a foreign agent tends to become the new norm of public life.

Will the columnists fan the blaze of mutual distrust or will they guide the public to recognize the formidable dangers of the world situation without hysteria? There is a cynical interpretation of mass media that provides a ready reply: The columnists will write what sells, or else. Therefore they will exploit the anxieties and uncertainties of the mass audience. But this answer is too glib. The American mood is not uniform, and insecurity will heighten opposing tendencies: aggressive impulses are held in check by norms of conscience and by the critical capacities of the mind. Our review of the treatment of the A-bomb has shown that the columnists as a whole have an obvious sense of civic responsibility. They incorporate into their own consciences the common inheritance. Most of them have a wider range of knowledge of security problems than more parochial leaders of opinion. It is reasonable to conclude that if one subgroup grows wildly aggressive, the others will, if possible, become more keenly aware of their own responsibilities.